The Changing Role of Students' Unions within Contemporary Higher Education

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Abstract

Despite profound changes to the higher education sector in the UK over recent years, which have tended to emphasise the role of prospective students as active choosers within a marketplace and encourage higher education institutions to place more emphasis on student engagement and representation as a means of improving the quality of the learning experience, the role of students' unions has remained largely unexplored. To start to redress this gap, this paper draws on a UK-wide survey of students' union officers and a series of focus groups with 86 students and higher education staff in ten case study institutions. It outlines the ways in which students' unions are believed, by those closely involved with them, to have changed over recent years, focussing on: the shift towards a much greater focus on representation in the role and function of the students' union; the increasing importance of non-elected officers; and the emergence of more co-operative relationships between the students' union and senior institutional management. The article then discusses the implications of these findings for both our understanding of the political engagement of students, and theorising student involvement in the governance of higher education institutions.

Key words: students' union, higher education, political participation, representation

Introduction

Students' unions occupy an important place within the landscape of UK higher education, and have a long history, with the first having been established at St Andrew's University in Scotland in 1864. Most students' unions in the UK are affiliated to the National Union of Students (NUS); currently, about 600 students' unions are constituent members of the NUS. Typically, all students (both undergraduate and postgraduate) automatically become members of their institution's students' union and, if their union is affiliated to the NUS, receive automatic membership of this, too. In the UK, students' unions have tended, historically, to carry out a range of functions for their members including: organising social activities; providing support on a range of academic and welfare issues; representing students both individually and collectively; and campaigning on local and national issues. The relative importance of these functions has differed over time – for example, campaigning work dominated many students' unions in the 1960s and became important again during the 2010 protests against the proposed increase in higher education tuition fees.

Nevertheless, despite profound changes to the higher education sector in the UK over recent years, which have tended to emphasise the role of prospective students as active choosers within a marketplace and encourage higher education institutions to place more emphasis on student engagement and representation as a means of improving the quality of the learning experience, the role of students' unions has remained largely unexplored within academic research. To start to redress this gap, this paper draws on a UK-wide survey of students' union officers and a series of focus groups with 86 students and higher education staff in ten case study institutions. It outlines the ways in which students' unions are believed, by those

closely involved with them, to have changed over recent years, focussing on: the shift towards a much greater focus on representation in the role and function of the students' union; the increasing importance of non-elected officers; and the emergence of more co-operative relationships between the students' union and senior higher education institution (HEI) management. The article then discusses the implications of these findings for both our understanding of the political engagement of students, and their involvement in the governance of higher education institutions.

Background

There is relatively little academic research on the role of students' unions within UK higher education. Nevertheless, in this part of the article we draw upon related bodies of work to provide some context for the arguments that we develop subsequently. In particular, we discuss patterns in political engagement amongst young people and students, and the ways in which students' 'voice' and influence are played out within higher education.

Political engagement of young people and students

Recent work on young people's engagement with formal politics has suggested that patterns have been relatively stable over the past decade or so: although young men and young women are interested in political matters, this is rarely translated into involvement in electoral politics (Henn and Foard, 2012; Phelps, 2012). Indeed, a large number of young people feel that they cannot influence decision-making at national level, and have a deep antipathy towards and distrust of political parties and professional politicians (Henn and Foard, 2012). Nevertheless, there is now strong evidence that many young men and young

women have a strong civic orientation and close involvement in other forms of political activity (Martin, 2012). For example, Sloam (2012) argues that they are ‘increasingly engaged in alternative repertoires, agencies and arenas of participation viewed as more effective and more relevant to their everyday lives’ (p.91). These alternative repertoires include involvement in consumer politics, community campaigns and international networks facilitated by online technology (Benedicto, 2012; Manning, 2013; Sloam, 2012, Vromen, 2011). Some recent forms of student protest are seen as part of this alternative agenda. Indeed, Theocharis (2012) has argued that the way in which social media was used extensively to mobilise students during the occupation of university buildings in 2010 is in keeping with the characteristics of young people’s politics – and particularly a focus on spontaneity. Scholars have also argued that non-participation in formal politics should not in itself be seen as a form of apathy; instead, it can be understood as a means of resistance to conventional political systems and processes (O’Toole et al, 2007). In explaining these trends, research has pointed to the impact of individualisation and deinstitutionalisation within wider society, and a more general decline in traditional collective action (Benedicto, 2012). As a result, it is argued, young people have a preference for self-actualising forms of political expression in which they become involved in personally meaningful causes, guided by their own lifestyles and social networks (Sloam, 2012; Vromen, 2011).

It is obviously not the case that the political engagement of students can be seen as identical to that of young people: many of the UK’s significant mature student population would not identify themselves as ‘young’, and many young people do not progress to higher education. Nevertheless, similarities are evident, and some of the literature on political engagement within higher education, specifically, has often sought to make direct connections with the wider political culture. For example, Giroux (2011) argues that the weak forms of political

protest and a conservative political climate that he claims are evident on American university campuses are directly related to ‘endless privatisation, closing down of critical public spheres and endless commodification of all forms of social life’ (p.334). Moreover, he suggests that where political activism has occurred, it has largely been linked to consumerist agendas – such as the right to party, or to consume alcohol. Similar arguments, about the relatively limited nature of student protest, have also been made in the UK (Williams, 2013). This analysis has not, however, been shared by all. Indeed, Rheingans and Hollands (2013) argue that the student occupations of university buildings in the UK that occurred in 2010, although a direct response to the proposed increase in tuition fees, had wider issues at their core – namely a broad critique of the purpose of education, and a concern for socio-economic inequalities. Drawing on evidence from Canada, Stockerner (2012) takes a rather different position, suggesting that the payment of tuition fees appears to be positively correlated with political engagement. He suggests that ‘paying their own tuition might not only render students more conscious of their education, it might also open up their view to other educational and social issues; issues that are political by nature’ (p.1040).

Although there is now a relatively large literature on young people’s political engagement, spanning the disciplines of political science, sociology, geography, youth studies and education, as noted above, relatively few studies have focussed on participation within students’ unions specifically. A notable exception to this is the work of Crossley and Ibrahim (2012) who have argued that students’ unions play an important role in facilitating political engagement through helping to establish social networks. Indeed, they contend that:

The size of the student population affords many minority interests the opportunity to hit critical mass and various campus foci, not least the centralised Students Union,

allow the members of this mass to find one another and form the networks necessary for whatever forms of collective action inspire them. (p.610)

Moreover, Crossley (2008) argues that the union is also an important mechanism for resource mobilisation, providing campaigners with ‘rooms in which they can meet, telephones, internet and print technologies’ (p.31). A similar argument has been advanced by Hensby (forthcoming), who emphasises the importance of being socialised as a political actor, and the role networks, established within higher education institutions, can play in this process. Research amongst undergraduate students in Canada has revealed similar findings, suggesting that a very active student body can entice other students to become politically interested and engaged over time (Stockerner, 2012). Hensby (forthcoming) does, however, acknowledge that social networks can also exert influence in the opposite direction – and, in some cases, ‘neuter students’ desires to convert political interests into action’ (n.p.). Moreover, the increasing prevalence of students living at home and/or taking up part-time jobs may make it less likely that social networks will continue to have such an effect on higher education campuses in the future (Crossley, 2008).

‘Voice’ and influence amongst young people and students

Within the UK and in many other countries, there have been various initiatives over the past decade or so that have aimed to increase the representation of young people and give them greater ‘voice’ in relation to decisions that affect them (Heath et al., 2009). Such initiatives have, however, often been critiqued within the academic literature for failing to facilitate genuine and democratic political expression. In relation to schooling, for example, although school councils are now common, Wood (2012) argues that:

Young people's political expressions largely remain contained within adult-defined and school-regulated notions of acceptable political action...many participatory opportunities offered to students mimic adult conceptions of the political, with the aim of equipping them for their *future* role as citizens. (p.337, italics in original)

She thus suggests that, within schools, young people have a liminal status as political beings, largely because of the emphasis on them as 'becomings'.

Similar arguments have been made with respect to youth councils (i.e. those not based in schools). They are often not representative of young people in general, with disadvantaged youth less likely to be involved (Williamson, 2002). Furthermore, there is some evidence of a disconnect between young people's understanding of democracy, and understandings that are often foregrounded in youth councils. For example, many of the respondents in Taft and Gordon's (2013) research with politically-engaged young people who had either left or refused to join a youth council believed that such councils often acted to 'tame' youth dissent rather than provide opportunities to foster youth political power and, for this reason, were seen as a potential mode of social control. They wanted to have authority and make an impact, and believed that the councils offered them merely a 'voice'. On the basis of this evidence, Taft and Gordon (2013) argue that youth activists and youth councils appear to have two distinct approaches to the goal of political participation: 'one emphasises the opportunity for self-expression and sees potential in young people's proximity to adult policymakers and the other focuses on making a difference in the world through a collective effort' (p.94). The young activists were sceptical of the assumption that 'voice' leads to

influence, and did not believe that their views, when expressed through representative fora such as youth councils, would have any impact on adult decisions.

While there has been very little research on the role of students' unions in general, a small number of scholars have discussed the changing nature of student representation in this area. Luescher-Mamashela (2013) argues that formal student involvement in institutional decision-making has its roots in the wave of university democratisation that began in the 1960s, largely in response to student protests, and affected many universities in the US, Western Europe and parts of the British Commonwealth. As a result, students in many countries 'moved from being a politically marginalised grouping to being recognised as a main constituency in university governance' (ibid., p.1444). However, during the 1980s and 1990s, the rise of neo-liberalism brought with it a raft of market-based reforms within the higher education sector and, in many universities, prompted a shift away from democratic forms of decision-making (involving student representatives and other stakeholders) towards more managerial approaches. With respect to the UK in particular, Rogers et al. (2011) suggest that the increasing involvement of students in the governance of higher education in the UK since the 1960s can be conceived of as a pyramid – from the contributions of (usually elected) students' union officers to high-level decision-making through Council and Senate, down to the role of course representatives on departmental staff-student liaison committees, and a wide range of informal contacts between students' union officers and university staff. Rogers et al. (2011) note the institutional variation in the way in which influence is (or is not) played out, which can be affected by the priorities of the particular students' union, the activities with which the union is engaged, local constraints on union activity (e.g. the amount of training provided), and the extent to which there is an alignment of values between the students' union and the wider university. Nevertheless, they conclude by arguing that there is

growing convergence across the sector as a consequence of: ‘the increasing concerns within the students’ union movement with the twin issues of efficiency and quality assurance having led unions towards the greater use of the benchmarking of best practices and to the more rigorous application of quality assurance frameworks’ (p.259).

With respect to the representative function of students’ unions, in particular, the typology developed by Luescher-Mamashela (2013) is informative. He distinguishes between four main ways in which the case for student representation in university decision-making has been made by relevant stakeholders and/or conceptualised by those analysing such trends. The first of these focuses on the origins of representation in student political activism, and is termed the ‘politically-realist’ case. From this perspective, ‘student representation in university decision making is considered a matter of *realpolitik*, holding out the promise of a more peaceful and orderly academic life’ (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013, p.1446). Universities are thus conceived as composed of competing internal stakeholders, whose differing priorities need to be accommodated. The second understanding of student representation is the ‘consumerist case’, based on the premise that students are consumers of the products provided by HEIs and, as such, should have input into the decisions that are made about them. Students are thus seen as having the right to representation as a means of safeguarding their interests. In contrast, the ‘communitarian case’ conceptualises students, not as consumers, but as ‘members of a collectivity engaged in the educational process’ (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013, p.1449). Student representation is thus justified simply by students being members of the community. Finally, the fourth perspective – the ‘democratic (and consequentialist) case’ – understands student representation as a means by which to further citizenship education, through inculcating democratic values and exercising democratic practice.

Sociologists of education have presented various critiques of this increasing involvement of students' unions in HEI governance and normative assumptions about student 'voice'. Indeed, Leathwood and Read (2009) argue that this 'voice' is closely linked to the construction of the student as a consumer and while, in some cases, it may have positive effects (they cite the example of a student saying that s/he should be let into a lecture late because s/he has paid for it), it leads to democracy being understood in economic rather than political terms. Morley (2003) develops a similar argument, suggesting that in contemporary higher education, the student voice has become 'domesticated', and closely linked to a consumer identity. Similarly, Williams (2013) contends:

Today's active campaigning students, who are heralded as agents of change within their institutions, are quick to learn the bureaucratic language of agenda items, assessment patterns, learning outcomes and programme monitoring, and are more likely to be found sitting on Staff-Student Liaison Committees than on picket lines. This domestication of the student voice and limiting of campaigning confirms the consumer identity of students rather than challenging it. (p.110)

While this literature provides a useful conceptual framework for exploring the nature and role of students' unions within contemporary higher education, its empirical base is weak. We know little about how those who become involved in students' unions understand their role, nor how students' union officers and senior HEI staff relate to each other in practice. The remainder of this article explores both these issues, drawing on data from HEIs across the UK.

Research methods

The article is based on data collected during 2012 through two main methods: an online survey completed by students' unions officers, and focus groups within ten case study institutions. All students' union representatives across the UK were contacted, by email, with information about the research, a request to complete the online survey and a link to the relevant website. The email was sent to both elected officers and permanent students' union staff in all students' unions affiliated to the NUS. Two reminder emails were sent, to maximise the response rate. The survey included both open and closed questions, and included the following topics: the roles played by students' union leaders; the extent to which these roles have changed over time; the perceived effectiveness of these roles; the relationship between students' union leaders and the other leaders and managers within the organisation at which they were based; the relationship between NUS leadership roles and other student leadership roles; and the perceived diversity of students' union leadership. The survey also asked if respondents would be prepared to take part in a follow-up focus group. 176 students' union officers completed the survey, including both elected officials and permanent members of union staff. The demographic characteristics of the survey respondents are provided in Table 1. All responses were imported into a statistical software package and analysed.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

On the basis of the analysis of the data from the online survey, ten higher education institutions (referred to as HEIs 1-10 hereafter) were chosen to take part in the subsequent phase of the project, which focused on generating more detailed, qualitative data through

focus groups. This sub-sample was chosen to represent the diversity of the sector as well as different patterns of response to the questionnaire and comprised: three HEIs in the Russell Groupⁱ; two HEIs established in the 1960s, that are not part of the Russell Group; four newer institutions that gained university status after 1992; and one specialist HEI that offers a relatively limited range of courses. In each institution, two focus groups were conducted: one with students' union officers (typically comprising four to six individuals), and a second with senior managers (typically comprising four individuals). In total, 88 people took part in one of the 20 focus groups: 42 senior managers and 46 students' union officers. With the agreement of participants, the focus groups were audio-recorded and fully transcribed, and the transcriptions uploaded to NVivo, a software package for qualitative data analysis. The transcripts were then analysed, and themes identified.

The changing nature of students' unions

Over three-quarters (78 per cent) of the students' union officers who responded to the online survey thought that the role of their students' union had changed over the time that they had been at their institution. In this section, we explore the nature of this change by focussing on three main themes from the survey and focus groups: the shift towards a much greater emphasis on representation in the role and function of the students' union; the increasing importance of non-elected members of the union; and the more co-operative nature of relationships between students' union officers and senior HEI management. Although there was some variation between institutions, the themes we discuss below were evident across many of the HEIs involved in the research and all of the 'types' of case study institution (i.e. Russell Group, 1960s foundation, post-1992 and specialist institution)ⁱⁱ.

Centrality of the representative function

One of the main ways in which the students' unions were thought to have changed over recent years was in respect to representation. When asked about the change they had witnessed during their time within their students' union, almost a third of survey respondents described the union as having taken on a role that was now significantly more representative of students. Representation was also the role most commonly carried out by the students' unions that participated in the survey, and the role that the greatest number of respondents thought was most important (see Table 2). It was typically claimed to have a direct impact on those in the wider student body by helping to ensure that they received the best possible experience during their time in higher education.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Participants in the focus groups also believed that, over the course of their time at their institution, the importance of the representative function of the students' union had increased significantly. Although a majorityⁱⁱⁱ of senior managers welcomed this shift towards a narrower focus on representing students, this was not shared universally. Indeed, senior managers at HEI 3 were concerned that such a focus was starting to undermine the position of the students' union:

I think what we're probably articulating is a pattern where the student union influence [on the HEI] has just eroded and eroded and eroded and is being distilled down to this kind of pivotal role around representation and so on [agreement] and that just leads to all the questions around, you know, what's it there for, what's it doing and that kind of thing and so on.

Many contended that a shift towards a stronger representative function had been accompanied, in some institutions at least, by a corresponding decline in the campaigning or 'activist' role of the students' union:

There's a slight tension as to whether they behave like a consumer body, a body representing consumers, you know, are we getting value for money, or a trade union. And traditionally they behave more like a trade union but perhaps there's a tendency now with the change in the fee structure, to behave more like a consumer body I think the consumer, the consumer role is probably becoming more apparent. (Senior managers' focus group, HEI 10)

I've seen the student union go from being a very political movement to being much more focussed on the actual student experience... There's more and more concern to make sure we work in partnership with the students who are actually here. (Senior managers' focus group, HEI 5)

This emphasis on partnership is discussed further below.

A similar focus on the importance of a representative function can be seen in relation to the individual roles held by students' union officers. The NUS has developed a typology that identifies four main functions of an elected students' union officer: 'activist' (campaigning and organising local and national action on issues affecting students); 'representative' (representing the views and concerns of all sections of the student body); 'minister' (providing expertise and advice on specific areas e.g. welfare, education, sports) and 'trustee' (being a member of the trustee board for the students' union). Respondents who held elected (rather than permanent) roles within their students' union were asked about the relative importance of these functions to them and the role they held. The representative role was considered to be the most important role by a large majority of respondents (40 of the 62 elected officers who answered this question). The activist and minister roles were each considered to be most important by a much smaller number of respondents (10 and 9, respectively).

When asked to explain the importance that had come to be placed on the representative function of students' unions, almost all respondents pointed to changes in the external environment. Higher tuition fees were cited by many as a reason why their students' unions

had come to put more emphasis on representation and, in many cases, were being strongly encouraged in this endeavour by their institutions:

The change in the fee regime has been very expensive for students, but it has brought them into the governance structures far more strongly...I think there is a real tendency in all institutions now to take the student voice more seriously, and I think that's partly to do with fees and partly to do with league tabling...there has been a step change in the way in which universities listen to students. (Senior managers' focus group, HEI 10)

Some focus group participants believed that activism and other more overtly political activities had become less important for students' union because of a greater alignment of values between unions and senior university management, brought about – at least to some extent – by the similar pressures that both now faced. Here, respondents pointed, in particular, to the impact of the National Student Survey, and how, as a result of the insertion of a question specifically about the performance of students' unions^{iv}, unions were having to 'think about themselves differently' (Senior managers' focus group, HEI 5) – as being publicly judged by students, and ranked against other unions across the country.

Increasing importance of non-elected members

Alongside a shift towards prioritising representation, participants from eight of the ten case study institutions described how permanent staff within the students' union had come to take on more power, sometimes at the expense of those who had been elected. The senior managers at HEI 3 were typical of many in noting that there had been a 'shift of balance of

our contacts' away from elected officers and towards those in long-term roles. They described how there were now fewer sabbatical officer roles, and financial responsibility had been transferred from elected officers to the senior manager of the students' union. For a large majority of respondents, such changes were seen in broadly positive terms, as providing greater continuity from year to year, and better support structures for those in elected positions (who typically occupy their role for one year only), particularly at the start of their term of office. Senior managers in several of the focus groups believed that a shift of power towards the permanent staff had enabled the students' union to develop a more strategic vision and pursue a more coherent agenda:

there is a better quality of conversation going on I think in committees...because they're better briefed and they're, you know, they're told not to ride a hobby horse that is going to be, that's going to get them nowhere and they're given strategies for achieving what they're trying to achieve. So the quality of their contribution to the governance system I think has gone up. (Senior managers' focus group, HEI 10)

Not all respondents were, however, entirely comfortable with this change in roles. Some of those participating in the students' union focus group at HEI 8, for example, acknowledged that although there were, in their eyes, many advantages associated with permanent staff having taken on a more important role, it sometimes made it harder for those in elected roles to advance their own agenda: 'I know that some [elected] officers have found it difficult challenging the [students' union] senior leadership team, who have naturally all come from leadership roles and are leaders themselves, to say actually, "This is the representational voice of students....and this is the direction we'd like to go with please".' Similarly, the

senior institutional managers at HEI 3 regretted the shift they had witnessed over the previous year, towards more contact with permanent union staff and less with elected officers:

I think there has been a significant shift over the last year to do with the appointment of professional managers in the student union, and I think that has altered the dynamic considerably over the last year We've previously had, what I have considered to be very, very positive engagement of the student union officers and I think things have changed this year because I think that they've been, the student union officers have felt more answerable to the management structure backing their organisation The most significant manifestation of that I can give you is that myself and the academic registrar used to meet with the student union sabbatical officers once every two weeks and we were under inordinate pressure from the outset to meet with the chief exec of the student union we said well, again, we felt that that would change the tone and character of the interventions because we want that kind of genuine student [agreement] interaction I think something's changed this year and my perception is not for the better.

Relationships with senior management

Many of those who took part in the research (74 per cent of survey respondents) believed that the relationship between students' union officers and senior institutional managers had changed over time. A common theme across the survey and focus groups was a new willingness on both sides to engage in constructive ways. As with the prioritisation of the representative function of unions, discussed above, this change was typically explained by pointing to changes in the external environment, particularly the increase in tuition fees and

the insertion of the question about the performance of students' unions into the National Student Survey. Students' union officers at HE1, for example, claimed that the senior managers in their institution 'know they have to respond to the customers', while senior managers from HEI 8 stated explicitly that the students' union had become increasingly important because of the emphasis that had come to be placed on the 'student voice' 'for a variety of reasons, not least the NSS and its influence on league tables'.

Many focus group participants believed that there had been a similar degree of change in relation to students' unions' views of senior management in the HEI. Indeed, senior managers at HEI 3 claimed that the union now 'has a culture of working with the institution rather than seeing it as their role to just constantly be pointing out failings', and very similar sentiments were expressed by the managers at HEI 7. This shift in approach is likely to be related, at least to some extent, to the increasing importance of both the representative function of the students' union and permanent members of staff within students' unions, as discussed above. However, it can also be seen as a response by students' unions to some of the same pressures that have affected institutional managers – particularly the explicit measurement of performance through the NSS, and perhaps an expectation of the part of students paying higher fees that those in power (whether they be HEI managers or elected representatives) will work co-operatively to achieve change in the HEI environment in an efficient manner. Indeed, it was argued by some respondents that both groups (senior managers and students' unions officers) now had a vested interest in working together to heighten the reputation of the institution:

The union are very aware of what might damage the university and therefore the quality of what they see as the degree they get out of it.... the university reputation is

not just of importance to the university, it's also important to the student who goes out with a degree from the university and so we both feel there's a vested interest in supporting the student learning experience. (Senior managers, HEI 4)

A small number of focus group participants believed that, within an increasingly competitive higher education market, students' unions had more power – both as a result of the changing attitudes of senior management described above, and also the 'reputational damage' (Students' union focus group, HEI 4) that could be inflicted if students' unions created negative publicity for the institution. Moreover, over half of survey respondents thought they had 'some influence' on the decisions of senior staff. However, when this was pursued further in the focus group discussions, almost all students' union officers believed that, ultimately, power lay with senior HEI management. Officers at HEI 6 explained that it was necessary for them to compromise, as they had insufficient power to implement their own agenda, while those at HEI 3 explained:

There's a good level of conversation if you're sitting in a meeting with them [senior management] ... but like real decisions, ones that we would want to be involved in, are important for us to be involved in, are done outside, in meetings that we're not invited to...Or done at times like the summer, when they know that nobody's here, or everybody's busy doing handover and are training. (Students' union focus group, HEI 3)

The mechanisms for funding students' unions were also thought to be significant. Most unions received a large majority of their funding from their HEI, through an annual block grant, and this was thought, in some cases, to reinforce dependent relationships.

In some cases, even if students' union officers felt that they were relatively powerful in their relationships with senior management, they were aware that their initiatives could be blocked by other power bases within the institution. For example, focus group participants at HEIs 3, 4 and 10 all claimed that significant power lay with the individual departments or schools that made up the university, and these sometimes acted as a block to decisions that had previously been agreed by the students' union and senior management: 'Nothing will happen unless they [staff in departments] buy into it, and they don't buy into it because they resent senior management' (HEI 3). There was also a sense, among some respondents, that they were only powerful in as far as their agenda fitted with that of senior managers, and some resented being 'used' to bring about change in the face of resistance from staff at other levels within the organisation:

[It's] really poor management when... the middle management have to you know maybe introduce an unpopular decision with the academic workforce and they will say, oh the union are making us do that...well no, it's your senior management team who have adopted that policy...So sometimes the officers are viewed with a distrust or a hostility even from the academics; it's probably unnecessary. (Students' union focus group, HEI 1)

Thus, while a majority of respondents from both students' unions and senior management described closer, more co-operative and less adversarial relationships, this was rarely thought to have been associated with any significant shift of power away from institutional leaders.

Discussion

The evidence presented above indicates that, although there remains some diversity across the sector, there are a number of changes to the role of students' unions that have been played out in many HEIs, and across all types of institution. We have suggested that change is particularly notable in relation to: students' unions becoming increasingly focussed on a representative function; a shift of power and influence away from elected officers and towards permanent members of union staff; and a greater alignment of values and more co-operative relationships between students' unions and senior management. In this part of the paper, we discuss the implications of these findings for our understandings of the political engagement of students within higher education. We then focus on one of the key findings – the increased importance of the representative role of students' unions – to explore meaningful ways in which this representation can be theorised.

Students, politics and power

The strong evidence of an increased focus on the representative role of students' unions, and the importance attributed to this by many respondents (both union officers and HEI senior managers) provides some support for the arguments outlined in earlier parts of this article about the 'domestication' of the student voice (Morley, 2003; Williams; 2013). By focussing on representation, students' union officers inevitably foreground issues that affect the day-to-day lives of students rather than broader political or social concerns that may be more aligned with an 'activist' agenda. Moreover, the increasing convergence between the values and priorities of students' unions and senior management (as a result of similar pressures coming to bear on both parties), suggests that fewer spaces are now available within higher education

institutions from which to offer a radical challenge to either local or national policy. Moreover, the impact of changes, such the inclusion within the National Student Survey of a question about students' unions' performance and the introduction of higher tuition fees, on the way in which students' unions function and their changing priorities, provides a clear illustration of the close relationship between higher education policy and the nature of political activity on campus (Giroux, 2011).

While students' unions may provide an important space within higher education institutions for like-minded people to get together and pursue collaborative projects, this research has provided little evidence to support Crossley and Ibrahim's (2012) thesis that they play a significant role in facilitating political engagement, or inculcating a more 'activist' orientation. Our data suggest that the space of the students' union was important for bringing students together, but typically for the purpose of representing other students and/or delivering services and events in the wider institution (Brooks et al., 2013). In line with Sabri's (2011) argument, we suggest that student 'voice' was articulated primarily in relation to concerns about 'the student experience' rather than any more political agendas. The increasingly powerful role, within students' unions, of permanent members of staff also raises questions about Crossley and Ibrahim's thesis, as elected officers (in some institutions) come to have less contact with senior managers, and strategic priorities are increasingly shaped by those without a democratic mandate. In relating our data to broader themes about political engagement (O'Toole et al., 2007), it is important to emphasise that we are not claiming that the voice of *all* students has been 'domesticated' in the ways we discuss above. Indeed, evidence of recent student occupations in the UK (Rheingans and Hollands, 2013) suggests that there remain some spaces within higher education – even if not within the day-to-day

practices of students' unions – within which more radical critiques can be articulated and students can engage politically.

Many of our students' union respondents believed they did have a significant influence on the senior management within their institution, and certainly felt that they were listened to by senior staff more than their counterparts had been in the past. Nevertheless, they were also clear about the limits to their influence, with almost all those who took part in the focus groups believing that, ultimately, power lay with senior managers (with some reporting that they felt 'used' as part of an attempt by senior management to push through change in the face of resistance from staff). Moreover, even if senior managers were themselves committed to forging more equal relationships and devolving some power to students' unions, initiatives brought forward by students' unions could sometimes be blocked by staff lower down the organisational hierarchy – at faculty or departmental level. The evidence discussed above also suggests that the power of those holding elected positions was being eroded *within* students' unions by the increasing importance of permanent members of staff. (It is important to note, however, that such changes had typically been brought about by the students' unions themselves, as a means of trying to ensure greater strategic continuity, and has not imposed by the wider university.) Furthermore, the focus on 'local' issues, as a consequence of the foregrounding of the representative role with the remit of both the students' union as a whole and that of individual officers, suggests that the arena within which power and influence can be exerted is limited. Here, then, there are broad parallels with the critiques that have been made in other areas – for example, in relation to school councils and youth parliaments – that initiatives to give 'voice' often fail to facilitate genuine political expression or enable real power to be exercised (Williamson, 2002; Wood, 2012).

The representative role of students' unions

The data generated through this project underline the increasing importance, within the UK, of the representative function of students' unions. However, as the typology developed by Luescher-Mamashela (2013) and discussed earlier in this paper suggests, representative roles can be theorised in a number of different ways. Our research provides little evidence to support the idea that union officers or senior managers see student representation either as one strand of a broader project of democratic education or as part of a collective and communitarian endeavour (two of the four cases in Luescher-Mamashela's typology). Indeed, the significant power imbalances between senior managers and students' union officers, articulated by students' union respondents at almost all of the case study institutions, and discussed above, suggests strongly that in very few cases were students (or their representatives) seen as equal members of the HEI community. It was only in one institution that respondents believed that real power lay with the students' union. Instead, the project data offer support to both the politically-realist and consumerist cases. While in Luescher-Mamashela's (2013) typology, these two cases are seen as conceptually and practically distinct, the survey and focus group data would suggest that, in some contexts and points in time, they should not be seen as mutually exclusive but as mutually reinforcing. It seems likely that a higher education sector that is market-based and consumer-oriented would tend to promote both a consumerist case for representation and a politically-realist one – as, within highly competitive and consumer-led markets, disgruntled and vociferous students can inflict significant harm to institutional reputation and recruitment. Indeed, our data suggest that student representation was viewed by senior staff (as well as students' union officers themselves) as an effective means of both responding to the demands of students – conceived

largely as consumers – and reducing the risk of damaging conflicts emerging between different constituent groups on campus.

The typology developed by Luescher-Mamashela (2013) and outlined earlier in the article is predicated on the notion that the interests of student leaders and those of university leaders are different; even the communitarian case, which places emphasis on a single community, notes that different stakeholders bring different resources, perspectives and priorities. The responses to our survey and focus group questions suggest that, in the contemporary manifestation of the neo-liberal university, both students' unions and senior managers are subject to very similar market-based pressures, which give rise, in many cases, to similar concerns. The example that was referred to most often by our respondents was that of the insertion into the National Student Survey of a question about the performance of the students' union – the responses to which feed into institutional rankings and league table positions, and also specific rankings of students' unions across the country. While this could be viewed as licence for students' unions to be more vociferous in pushing student concerns – as a means of securing the approval of the wider student population – our data suggest that it has had the opposite effect, and increased partnership working with senior management. Students' unions typically believed that they needed to work with rather than against HEI leaders, to gain support for their initiatives, do nothing to compromise the income they received from the institution (through the annual block grant), and ensure that they were seen by other students as having achieved specific changes – rather than just having adopted an oppositional stance. Thus, it seems likely that when students' unions become subject to the same managerialist techniques as HEIs, it becomes less likely that they will be motivated to act in a questioning and potentially critical manner.

Conclusion

In this article, we have drawn upon survey and focus group data with elected officers, permanent union staff and senior HEI managers from across the UK to explore the nature of students' unions in contemporary higher education. In particular, we have outlined three ways in which respondents believed their unions had changed, with unions taking on a much stronger 'representative' role; permanent members of union staff assuming more power; and values between union officers and senior managers becoming more aligned. In many ways, these changes can be interpreted in a positive light: it is important that students are represented effectively within their institutions, and many students' unions have devoted significant time and energy to ensuring that the student 'voice' is heard loudly on campus. Moreover, the increasing importance of permanent members of staff can be seen as part of an attempt, on the part of unions, to develop longer-term strategies for achieving change. Nevertheless, on the basis of this evidence, we have suggested that an ostensibly closer relationship between students' unions and senior management often belies enduring inequalities in power. Indeed, while senior managers may be offering students' unions more of a 'voice' within institutional governance structures than in the past, wider sectorial pressures (such as new performance measures for students' unions, articulated through the NSS) may be limiting the capacity of unions to take up more questioning, critical and 'activist' positions. Finally, we have argued that the increasing emphasis on student representation – evident across our dataset – should not be seen as necessarily in tension with the managerialist imperatives of the neo-liberal university. Instead, we have suggested that if such representation is conceptualised through 'consumerist' and 'political-realist' lenses, it can be seen as entirely consonant with the marketised nature of contemporary higher education.

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ⁱ The Russell Group is comprised of 24 ‘research intensive’ HEIs, which typically occupy high positions in national league tables.

ⁱⁱ In addition, there were no obvious differences by HEI ‘type’ in the extent to which respondents reported a managerial ethos.

ⁱⁱⁱ When we report data from the quantitative part of the project, we provide percentages or actual numbers. However, as the qualitative elements of the research aimed to explore specific themes in some depth, rather than document exactly how many people held particular views, we believe that giving precise numbers of respondents may give a misleading view about the nature of the data and the claims we wish to make. This is particularly important with respect to the focus groups, when we collected data at the level of the group, rather than the individual. As a result, we have used phrases such as ‘a majority of respondents’ and ‘a small number of focus group participants’ when reporting qualitative data.

^{iv} Since 2005, the National Student Survey (a survey that all final year undergraduates across the UK are asked to complete) has asked students about the extent to which they agree that ‘I am satisfied with the Students’ Union at my institution’.